

MARCH 10, 1976

THE RETURNS FROM FLORIDA

ANNCR: CHARLES MEDD LOOKS AT THE RESULTS OF THE FLORIDA PRIMARY ELECTION WHERE REPUBLICAN VOTERS CHOSE PRESIDENT FORD AND DEMOCRATS PICKED FORMER GEORGIA GOVERNOR JIMMY CARTER.

VOICE: WHAT HAPPENED IN FLORIDA TUESDAY WAS ALMOST UNTHINKABLE JUST A FEW WEEKS AGO. UNTIL THEN THE POLITICAL EXPERTS HAD ALL BUT CONCEDED THIS PRIMARY ELECTION TO REPUBLICAN RONALD REAGAN AND DEMOCRAT GEORGE WALLACE. FLORIDA'S CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN VOTE SEEMED TAILOR-MADE FOR THE CALIFORNIA CHALLENGER WHOSE STATE CAMPAIGN MANAGER AT ONE STAGE PREDICTED A SMASHING TWO-TO-ONE VICTORY. AND WHILE NOT ONE EXPECTED GEORGE WALLACE TO REPEAT HIS SWEEPING FLORIDA WIN OF 1972, THE WALLACE VOTE -- COMPARED TO A ROCK BECAUSE IT NEITHER GROWS NOR SHRINKS -- WAS SEEN AS TOO BIG TO OVERCOME. CLEARLY, THE EXPERTS HAD SPOKEN TOO SOON OR THE VOTERS FAILED TO HEAR THEM.

SEVERAL FACTORS CHANGED THE REPUBLICAN PICTURE IN FLORIDA. PRESIDENT FORD'S THREE PRIMARY WINS IN NEW ENGLAND SHOWED FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT HE WAS ELECTABLE OUTSIDE HIS OLD MICHIGAN CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT. THOSE EARLY VICTORIES HAD TWO IMMEDIATE EFFECTS: THE PRESIDENT'S CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION, OFF TO A WOEFULLY SLOW START IN FLORIDA, SUDDENLY ATTRACTED VOLUNTEERS, AND AS THINGS LOOKED UP FOR MISTER FORD, HIS ONCE-CONFIDENT CHALLENGER CHANGED HIS CAMPAIGN TACTICS. DROPPING HIS PLEDGE NOT TO ATTACK THE PRESIDENT, MISTER REAGAN LASHED OUT AT WHAT HE CALLED A LACK OF NATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND AMERICA'S RAPID DECLINE IN WORLD AFFAIRS. IN THE END, MISTER FORD'S MOST IMPORTANT ASSET WAS PERHAPS THAT MUCH-MISALIGNED OFFICE HE OCCUPIES. FOR THE FOURTH STRAIGHT PRIMARY, REPUBLICAN VOTERS REFUSED TO TURN THEIR BACKS ON AN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT.

ON THE DEMOCRATIC SIDE, GEORGE WALLACE'S FALL FROM THE TOP HAS TWO PROBABLE EXPLANATIONS. FOUR YEARS AGO SCHOOL BUSING TO ACHIEVE RACIAL INTEGRATION WAS A HOTLY CONTESTED ISSUE IN FLORIDA, AND WALLACE ITS CHIEF CRITIC. IN THAT ELECTION, THE ALABAMA GOVERNOR WAS THE SOUTH'S ONLY SERIOUS PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER, BUT IN 1976 THE BUSING CONTROVERSY HAD PASSED, AND FLORIDA DEMOCRATS FOUND AN ALTERNATIVE REGIONAL CANDIDATE IN JIMMY CARTER FROM NEIGHBORING GEORGIA.

FOR THE DEMOCRATS, THE FLORIDA RESULTS REVIVED THE CARTER CAMPAIGN, TEMPORARILY TARNISHED BY HIS POOR SHOWING IN LAST WEEK'S MASSACHUSETTS PRIMARY. SENATOR HENRY JACKSON -- WHO FINISHED A RESPECTABLE THIRD BEHIND CARTER AND WALLACE -- WAS NEITHER HELPED NOR HURT, NOR WERE THE MORE LIBERAL CONTENDERS WHO CAREFULLY AVOIDED THE FLORIDA CONTEST. THE OBVIOUS LOSER WAS GEORGE WALLACE WHO CAN NO LONGER CONTEND THAT HE IS HIS PARTY'S ONLY SOUTHERN SPOKESMAN. IF FLORIDA PRODUCED A WINNER, IT WAS CLEARLY GERALD FORD. THE PRESIDENT'S LEAD OVER RONALD REAGAN IS GROWING, AND UNLESS THE GAP IS NARROWED SOON, THE REAGAN CHALLENGE -- SO PROMISING ONE MONTH AGO -- COULD COME TO AN ABRUPT END.

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